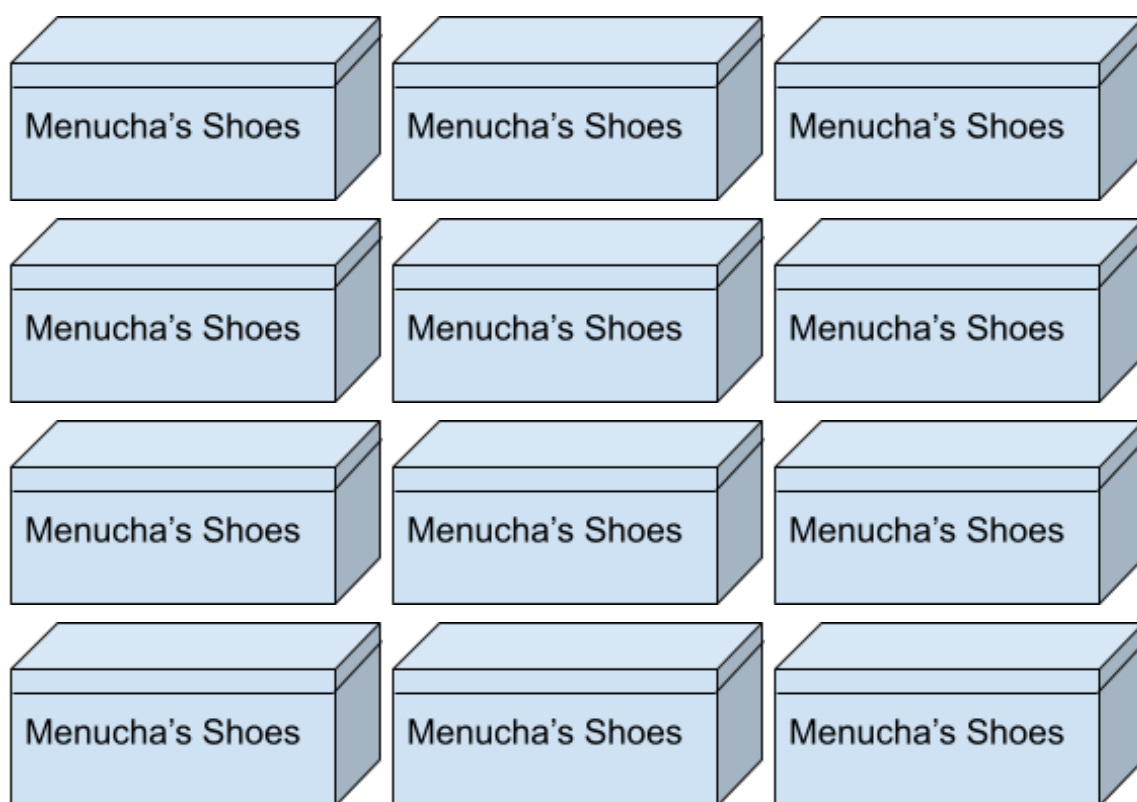


Life Through Shoes



Written and illustrated by: Menucha Libman

Life Through Shoes

Prologue:

As I worked on compiling outfits for this book I realized a clear theme. Most of my fashion memories are linked to the shoes I was wearing during the event. Each chapter explores my outfit through my shoe memories. I have always loved collecting shoes and believe a good shoe can pull together any outfit. Cheers to shoes and happy memories!

Forward:

Menucha Libman's descriptive work captures life's moments large and small through the memory and feeling of what she wore, particularly her footwear. Accompanied by whimsical illustrations, Libman's journal conveys the tenderness of a toddler's hesitation to clamber over a creek in sturdy stride rite baby shoes, the determination of learning how to tie laces on a pair of all star high tops, a schoolgirl's prim confidence of the perfect shoe to accompany her uniform, and on to riding boots, heels, prized vintage finds, and last minute shopping for the perfect stiletto for a family wedding. Throughout the piece, detailed hairstyles, nail polish, outfits and accessories add richness and convey the emotional experience of having the right shoes for each occasion. Here we study how an outfit impacts childhood and beyond. The reader can sense the visceral joy of stomping through puddles in beloved rain boots, and the seething fury towards a schoolyard bully who copies a carefully thought out look. Memories are pondered through storytelling and remembering the weather, the scenery, the rules, the long walks and one big leap over a little creek.

By Shoshana Brenenson

21 November 2022

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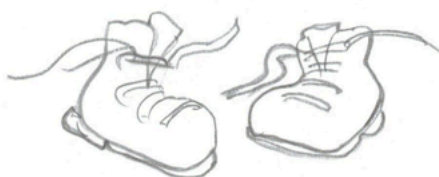
Chapter 1: Memory

I grew up spending summers and weekends at my family's countryside home. The house sits right outside a small town in the Catskills, on the Delaware river. Surrounded by nature, the property embraces the ecosystem. Each spring, among leftover leaves from fall, pine needles, and new growth of grass, moss, and plants, two creeks form on either side of the house. Rain and melted snow flow into the river. At the creek on the left hand side of the property is where I have my first memory.

When we arrived at the property, my older sister and I ran from the car to the garden in the back of the house. A year and half my senior, she skipped over the five inch creek. I looked down at my small feet. *Pre-Shaped* white leather high top shoes *wrapped* around my ankles. Light coral pants with a blue floral pattern *suspended* from my waist before *inserting* into my shoes. A white long sleeve crew neck sweatshirt *enclosed* by upper body, keeping me warm in the chilly spring mountain air.

Earlier that morning, my mother *slicked* my hair back into a side part behind my ears. A look that became my signature. My arms and legs were *moisturized* with baby lotion and the subtle scent mixed with fresh mountain air. The change from crawling to walking meant I had *lost the chubby baby weight* in my legs. My nails were *clipped* and freshly *painted* light pink.

The Stride Rite shoes felt solid on my feet. I learned to walk, tumbled, and played confidently. I was hesitant to step over the creek. I did not believe my legs were long enough to cross and worried my shoes would get wet. I stared nervously at legs and shoes, my muscles tensing in anticipation of the big step I needed to take.



Chapter #2: Rain

Rain in NYC is a bother. The streets instantly become a sloppy mess. Dirt and grime creeps up from every crevice as raindrops filter through dirty leaves. I wanted rain boots for the longest time. I did not like when my shoes got dirty or damp from walking in the rain. The rainboots waited patiently in my closet for the first rain.

I *inserted* my feet into stiff *pre-shaped* red rubber rain boots. The black cotton tights *wrapped* around my legs matched the watermelon seeds on the boots. I *enclosed* my torso with a matching red rain jacket. I *held* a small green umbrella in my hand, it matched the green boot soles. A perfectly coordinated outfit was ready.

It was a vacation day from school and the tops of the trees outside my bedroom window were scattered with rain droplets. I dampened my hair with some water to *relax* the frizz. My mother then *combed* my hair into a low bun and *secured* it with a big red bow. I spent the morning *painting* my nails red. The gloomy weather dried my lips so I *moisturized* with Chapstick.

I wanted rainboots for the longest time and this first pair felt like winning the lottery. It was finally raining, and for the first time, I was excited. School was out for the day, I had nowhere to go. After spending the morning inside at home I was anxious to get outside. This rain storm was not going to pass without the inauguration of my new boots. That afternoon, I went to the store to get some ingredients for dinner. My perfect rain outfit had met the rain, I could not have been happier.



Chapter # 3: River

I do not know if the store had a name. I simply knew we were going to Frank and Carol's store. The quaint general store on Lower Main Street, in the upstate New York Catskills town, was flooded with sunlight pouring in from the front windows. Fishing gear and country supplies packed every corner ceiling to floor. The right wall supported a large old repurposed supermarket fridge filled with rubber soled water shoes. Summers officially began here in the general store.

Earlier that morning, all of us who were vacationing together, had tried on river shoes from the years before. A few of us needed new sizes. Digging through the large pile, I found a black and green pair in my size. The shoes are designed to function well in the river ecosystem. Rubber soles with deep ridge treadings *wrapped* up over the toes connecting with mesh that then fastened around the ankle with a drawstring closure. I removed the shoes that *enclosed* my feet to try on the kid size 5 pair. Quickly realizing they would not fit with the white cotton socks *bunched* around my ankles I pulled those off too. The *pre-shaped* water shoes slid on smoothly, *enclosing* my feet.

Strands of hair escaped my ponytail that was loosely *secured* with an elastic hair tie. The strands *tangled* as they billowed in the AC breeze. Goosebumps *appeared* on arms, the store was cold compared to the June sun outside. The slight beginnings of a sunburn *brushed* across the bridge of my nose. My arms and legs were still pasty white from the winter. I *flexed* my leg muscles and stood on my tippy toes to see Frank and Carol. They stood smiling behind the counter, *glowing* with the everlasting tan of the winter Florida sun.

Summer had officially begun. I was giddy with excitement. Happy to see old friends while rushing to find the perfect shoe. The shoes protected my feet from the rocky river bed, I was ready. Next stop, swimming in the Delaware River.



Chapter # 4: Laces

Cool people wear Converse All Stars sneakers. My parents did, the neighbor's teenage daughter did, and the guy who fixed motorcycles did. There was a pair my size sitting on the top shelf of the closet. My sister had outgrown them a couple months before. I wanted to wear them; they would make me cool.

The sneakers loosely *enclosed* and *suspended* off the tops of my feet. Their green canvas was *adorned* with large white polka dots. The laces, *inserted* into the metal grommets, seemed too long one moment and too short the next, as my short fingers tried to tie them. The soles did not have much traction, *worn down* from previous wears. My feet were sliding on the polyurethaned floor.

I struggled to *tie* the laces tight. I had clipped my nails too short that morning. My recently *moisturized* hands held a *clammy* grip on the laces. Finger muscles *clenching* from the strain. My back was *arched* over my knees as I tried to find a comfortable position.

That afternoon my parents had told me I could wear the sneakers when I learned to tie them myself. I wanted to wear them to school the next day. I sat on my bedroom floor for two hours determined to learn. Through trial and error and with a lot of persistence, I figured it out. I was proud coming down the stairs to breakfast the next morning, I had learned and the cool shoes were now mine.



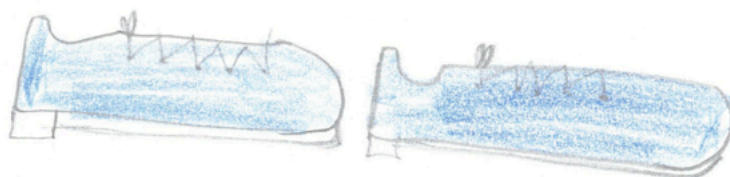
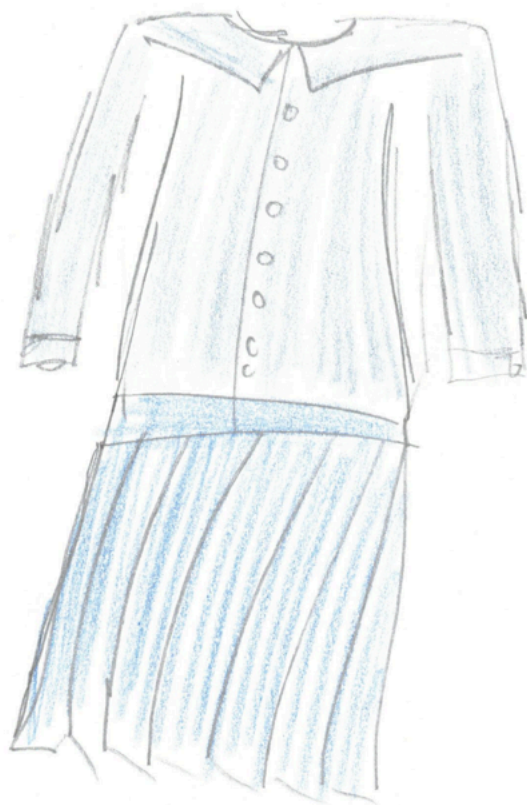
Chapter # 5: Bully

I attended a private middle school local to the community I was raised in. The school was located just over a mile from my home. My experience in middle school could be described in one color: Blue. The classroom floor tiles: baby blue, my homeroom teacher's favorite marker color: royal blue, the light bulbs in the hallways and common areas: blue hue. The principal's most commonly worn suit was navy and the student uniform was all shades of blue. The atmosphere was not welcoming and could be described as blue too. Bullying was rampant amongst all the classes in my school. My class's experience with bullying was particularly bad.

The blue uniform was simple. A light blue stiff collared button down oxford shirt *suspended* from my shoulders and *tucked* into the skirt, it felt rough against my skin. The dark navy pleated skirt *wrapped* around my waist and *flowed down* to mid calf. Soft navy cotton tights *enclosed* my legs protecting them from the itchy skirt. A lighter navy shade leather lace up Tommy Hilfiger oxford shoes *tied tightly* on my feet.

The morning was chilly with strong fall winds. The tight center back braid I had *pulled* my hair into that morning was now *sprinkled* with flyaways that escaped. My blue outfit *highlighted* the blue streaks in my eye color. My skin was still *tanned* from the summer. My face was already *flushed* from the blasting heat in the classroom.

I was a small kid and the bully was a tall broad heavy set shoe size 10 girl. She had gotten in trouble earlier that morning when the principal saw she was wearing sneakers to school. Her loud complaints about not being able to find school appropriate shoes in her size were starting to drive the rest of us nuts. I told her the shoes I was wearing came in big sizes and asked her not to get the color I had gotten. She walked in two weeks later with identical shoes. Her audacity to then try and paint reality that I had copied her crossed a line. She was the first bully I stood up to.



Chapter # 6: Kid

My high school was a 1.2 mile walk from my house. I rarely walked alone, always joined by a sister or picking up a friend along the way. The weather dictated how long the walk would take. If there was snow or ice we would leave home at 7.45 a.m. to make it on time for the 8.29 a.m. assembly. When it was cold and dry we would walk briskly, snaking our way through the neighborhood, allowing green lights to determine our path. My school always had the heat blasting, classroom temperatures would remain in the upper seventies all day. But 18 minutes of bitter cold weather ruled my outfit. I dressed for the walk, not the 8 hour school day.

Between the weather, strict uniform and dress code there was not much room for self expression. I liked it that way because it was simple to get dressed. The uniform was simple and preppy. 100% cotton white oxford button down shirt *suspended* from my shoulders. I always had the top button unbuttoned which left my neck *exposed*. On cold days we could wear the school sweater; maroon knit with a v-neck and the white school logo embroidered on the upper left hand side. Black pleated skirts that *fell below* the knee, fit *snugly* around the waist with a zipper and button closure. I had my initial (M) embroidered on the waistband. Tall brown leather riding boots *enclosed* my calf up to the knee.

Hair below shoulder length had to be up and away from the face. My long brown curly hair was *pulled back* into a ponytail or center braid and *secured* with an elastic hair tie. I struggled to control my flyaway baby hairs. I experimented with gel, spray, mousse, and oils. What worked was *applying* hair spray on wet hair and *brushing* the hairs down on a 30ish degree angle to my ears. Jewelry had to be understated and refined. Only stud or small hoop earrings were allowed. I *inserted* white gold hoop earrings into my ears, they hugged my earlobes.

These are my last pair of kids shoes. I had wanted boots that fit the mature environment I was studying in. My small shoe size made it hard to find a pair I liked. The riding boots, purchased from the Zara kids section, fit me perfectly. I loved the way the boots hugged my calves. The design was mature and fit in with what my classmates were wearing.



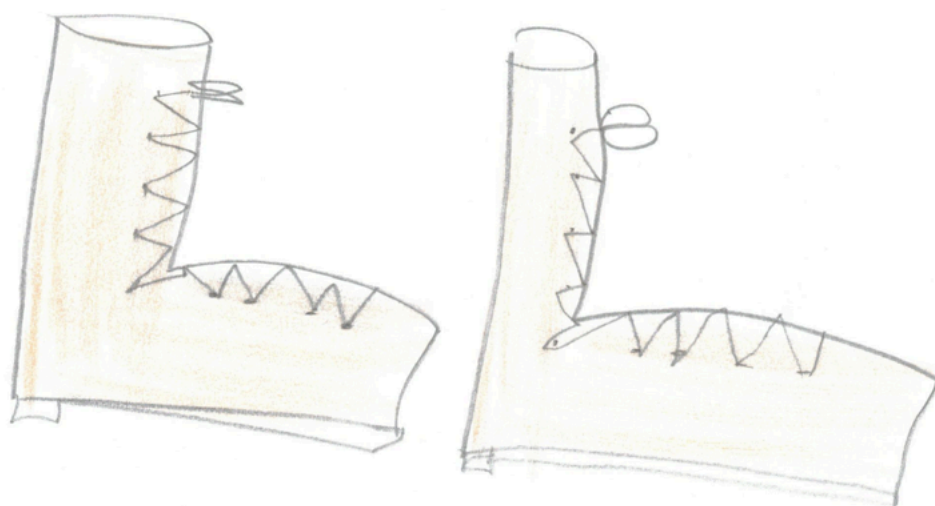
Chapter # 7: Boots

When I saw brand new tan boat booties in my size at the Vintage Thrift Shop in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, I figured the \$5 shoes were worth it. For the summer of 2019 they were the perfect shoe. I spent July working in a sleep away camp kitchen. We cooked daily meals for over two hundred people. My day started early and ended when dinner cleanup was done. It was easily a ten hour work day, most of it standing.

The leather and canvas booties *tied* with leather strings above my ankles. I *covered* my legs with black leggings and feet with cotton socks everyday. We were required to cover up as much as possible to protect from oil spraying and other dangerous occurrences. I *enclosed* the rest of my body in breathable stain resistant materials. I usually had a *fitted* 100% cotton t-shirt around my torso and an a-line skirt *suspended* from my waist.

Working in a commercial kitchen is hard. Each morning I *braided* my hair into two Dutch braids so the hair net could fit *snugly*. My back muscles constantly *ached* from the heavy lifting. My fingers were *covered* with cuts and burns. Interestingly, although my feet muscles *toned up* I never had problems with them hurting. The supportive shoes were great.

When I bought the shoes, I did not particularly like them. But at the end of the summer I had a hard time throwing them away. The wear and tear, stains, and broken soles now held a story. I was proud of the work I had done in them and was oddly missing the hectic kitchen scene. Wearing the shoes felt familiar and parting with them officially ended the chapter.



Chapter # 8: Red

Some of my luckiest shopping finds have been in thrift shops. Driving around I found an odd little shop in a kind lady's backyard shed. Floral scent burning candles were scattered around the shop. Every surface held a collection. Small glass figurines, vintage sewing supplies, recycled doll clothes, filled the top three shelves of a bookcase. The rest of the shelves held worn secondhand dated shoes.

One pair was tucked in the back of the ten dollar rack. I slipped my stocking *wrapped* feet into the *enclosed* and *pre-shaped* toe flats. They fit perfectly. The small red vintage snakeskin leather Gucci flats with a unique cut, *elongated* the foot. I could easily picture all the pieces in my closet I would *adorn* my body with and match with the shoes to create the perfect outfits.

The rich red color matched my *finger nail polish* perfectly. My toes *clenched* inside the shoes as I walked the few steps to the mirror, nervous the leather would crack. My hair *framed* my face with sundried beach waves. I *smiled* back at myself. These one of a kind shoes in such great condition were a lucky find. I *relaxed* my foot muscles to let the shoes support my foot.

I have worn the shoes many times. Despite the bold color they have served as quite the neutral. Dressed up or down, they complete almost every look in the closet. I feel confident when wearing them and particularly love the shape. I always chuckle at the bargain price I paid.



Chapter # 9: Excessive

On my twentieth birthday my close friend got married. It was the first post covid wedding I attended. After attending the ceremony in heels I quickly realized I needed to change before we hit the dance floor. While rushing home to swap shoes I remembered the pair of sneakers I had received exactly one year before as a gift for my nineteenth birthday. I had never worn the pink satin sneakers with matching pom poms adhered to the laces before and I hoped they would work for the night.

To the wedding, I wore a green mid calf length dress from H&M. Slight gathering along the shoulder seam created some *pre-shaped* height to the sleeves I inserted my arms into. Fabric was gathered up and *adhered* to the sleeve lining to create a ruching effect on the sleeves that exposed my wrists where I *clipped* on gold bracelets. I *inserted* matching gold earrings into the piercings on my earlobes. In preparation for the long night ahead, I tied the laces tightly on the sneakers *enclosing* my feet.

My mother had *trimmed* my hair that morning to clean up the uneven edges from a previous haircut. I then added some hair mousse to *define* my natural curl pattern. I *parted* my hair in a deep side part before *securing* it away from my face with a thin gold headband that matched my jewelry. I *applied* light makeup focusing on the lengthening mascara to make my eyes appear more open. I *filed* my nails into an almond shape and *painted* them with a particularly glossy polish to lengthen my fingers.

When I first received the shoes I did not think I would ever wear them. The contrast of a dressy fabric, like satin, on a sneaker was too girly and barbie-like. They were not my style and did not match with anything in my closet. I kept them anyway because I was hopeful they would come in handy one day. For my friend's wedding the contrast was what made them work, and I have now worn them a few times to hit the dance floor.



Chapter # 10: Search

Basic nude heels should not be hard to find but as time passed and my cousin's wedding got closer I could not find a quality pair anywhere. The morning of the wedding I left to take two finals at my school in downtown Brooklyn. My outfit was all ready but I still did not have any shoes to wear. After completing both finals I rushed to Nordstrom Rack on Fulton Street looking for a pair of shoes. I had stopped by numerous times during the past weeks without success but I was hopeful I would find something.

The gown I had sewn for the wedding had large cowl sleeves made from beautiful brightly geometric patterned silk that *suspended* from my shoulders and draped down to my wrists. The rest of the column dress was cut from a rich peacock green raw silk. Numerous darts allowed the fabric to *wrap* snugly around my torso creating a straight line from my hips down. The contrasting pattern patterns and colors worked well to *accentuate* my blue eyes. However, that also dramatically limited my shoe options. I needed simple *pre-shaped* shoes with no closures I could *insert* my feet into.

My hair was *straightened* and *slicked* back behind my ears. I *inserted* simple pearl earrings into the piercings on my earlobes. My face was well *moisturized* from the night cream I had applied that previous evening, making it a good canvas for the makeup artist. She chose to *apply* pink eyeshadow to my eyelids to highlight the pink lines from the sleeves of my dress. The artist *sprayed* my face and neck with some harsh makeup setting spray to stop any smudging while I rushed to take the tests and to the wedding.

With everything else prepared, I was fairly confident some pair of shoes would work out. However, I was nervous heading up the escalator to the Nordstrom Rack shoes department. I did not have a back up plan. When I got the size 6.5 section I was relieved to see a basic pair of nude stilettos. I quickly purchased the pair and rushed outside to catch a train home at the Hoyt Street subway station.



Chapter # 11: Perfection

Sometimes shoes belong to a place and no matter how hard you try they do not seem to work anywhere else. I had purchased a pair of suede blush pink heels from an online retailer during a major sale. The pointed toe elongated the foot while the block heel offered support making the shoe appropriate for an all day affair. I wore the shoes a few times but they never seemed to look quite right. I eventually gave them to my grandmother. We share the same shoe size and I thought she might have better luck.

One of the times I wore the shoes was to my friend's engagement party. I paired them with a dress in a similar blush shade. The dress had an A-line skirt that *suspended* from my waist. The neckline *tied* closed with a large bow. On that day, the *pre-shaped* shoes seemed a little too big and did not fit *snugly* on my feet. My stocking *wrapped* feet seemed to slide within the shoe with each step I took.

For this party I did not accessorize much. I *brushed* my hair into a basic high ponytail *secured* at the crown of my head with an elastic hair tie. I *splashed* some water on my face to freshen up. I *applied* some lotion to my neck and hands to even out my skin texture. After a quick glance in the mirror I was ready to go. On my way out of my house to the party I popped some spearmint gum in my mouth to *freshen* my breath.

None of the times that I wore these shoes did I feel confident. They never felt right on my feet and sometimes looked off with my outfits. This party was the last time I wore these shoes. I eventually realized the heels belonged on a European summer vacation, walking the cobblestone streets of ancient towns. When my grandmother booked a town hopping europe trip I gave her the shoes. The photos were beautiful and the shoes looked perfect in each one. I was happy the shoes found a place where they made sense.



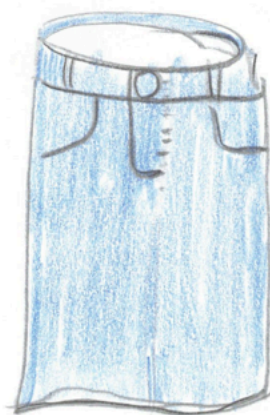
Chapter # 12: That's All

I went to London, UK the summer after my sophomore year in college. It was my first post covid international trip. Originally planned as a solo trip, it ended up being a girls trip with a couple friends from elementary school. I bought a pair of white tennis sneakers to be my primary shoes for the trip. I needed something that could be dressed down with denim and up with dresses.

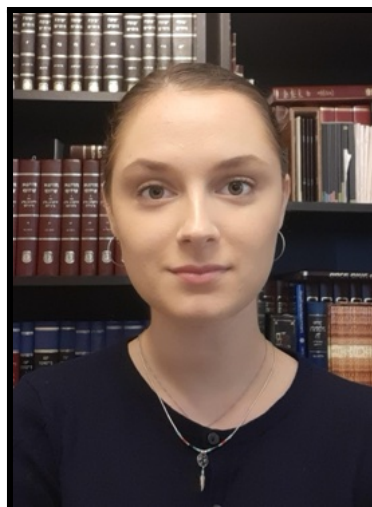
On my first day of the trip I paired the shoes with a casual look. I wore a soft navy cotton t-shirt with white pinstripes. I *tucked* the shirt into a straight knee length light wash denim skirt that *wrapped* around my thighs. I *inserted* a brown leather belt into the belt loops on the skirt waistband and clipped the closure tightly in the front center. I *inserted* my feet into the *pre-shaped* sneakers and tied the laces with loose bows.

I showered that morning to try and help rid my face of the jetlag and *wash* the sleep from my eyes. The British soaps I used to *clean* my hair had some weird scents that lingered with me the rest of the day. The different water harshness made my hair frizzy so I *slicked* it back with some hair gel into a tight low bun. After spending the day outside walking the city streets my face was *slightly sunburned* from the, unusual for London, harsh sun. I ended the day with some stretches to *relax* my muscles.

Most days I stayed out longer than friends to catch the sunset over one of the iconic bridges. I found an interesting form of peace watching the same sun set over someone else's city. Walking the London streets alone I let the familiar city sounds feed my thoughts. My mind fueled my steps. Now, when I wear the shoes I sometimes tap into that unique peace that still confuses me.



About the author:



Menucha Libman is a Junior at New York City College of Technology in Brooklyn, NY. She is majoring in Business and Technology of Fashion. Menucha enjoys exploring the world through the lens of fashion.